Ryan Padraig Kelly

Cade steadied his horse with a squeeze of both knees, keeping her dancing legs in check and protecting the dusty mounds below from wayward hooves. The four lines of raised dirt sheltered the still-warm bodies of his dead friends. The new mount had a sure spirit, along with an insatiable lust for speed, but she would have to wait a few moments longer before indulging in the open road. Black spots peppering her stark, white hide made the beast the most beautiful he had ever owned, but also the least likely to go

unnoticed. She would have to be sold as soon as possible. For now, the piebald, richly rewarded to him by the frontier town for his valour and sacrifice, would carry him as far from its gates as possible. The miles she would gift him, he hoped, would provide a buffer against the overwhelming shame that was eating away at his conscience. He intended to quickly put distance between himself and his loss after one last goodbye and a final apology.

Unable to curb the enthusiasm of his new filly any longer, Cade checked his saddlebags were secure, took a swig from his old,

rawhide canteen and silently tipped the rim of his hat to his men for the last time. Reining her around to face the open prairie, it took only the slightest touch of his spurs to send the coiled spring that was his steed bolting into the unknown, billowing up a cloud of dust that fell away in the wind of her speed. Neither of them looked back.

By the time he pulled her into a more controlled gait, there was nothing on the horizon but dry grasses, scattered boulders and the simmering of the noon-day heat. The horse was glistening all over under a sheen of sweat, a product of the harsh sun and their

mutual need to put Tailem’s Bend far behind them. For the horse it seemed a desperation to venture out into the world, beyond the only stable she had ever known. For Cade it was simply a desire to shed all reminders of his guilt. He slowed her further into a walk, he would need to teach the animal some control. A stricter hand would be required to offset the initial freedom he had afforded her, confusing for the animal, but necessary under the circumstances.

“Venture. Perhaps that would be a fitting name for you.” He muttered, so that only the two of them could

hear. Pointless, given their seclusion in the open, flat country. He could see at a glance how alone they truly were. It was idyllic when compared to the stifling attention he had endured from the grateful townsfolk. Glimpsing the shine of a small water body ahead, Cade adjusted their course and made a bee-line for the trickle of a stream that meandered over the rocks. It was a long journey to anywhere but here and they would need water above all else to survive the trip.

“I suppose you care little for who rides you. Only that they do it well,” Cade mused, his face

shedding droplets onto his loose shirt after a refreshing splash in the clean brook, “Bandit, sheriff or dunce. I imagine it means little, as long as you get to run.”

Venture raised her head from where she had been lapping greedily downstream and snorted, almost in response.

“In case it should interest you…yer carry a coward. A no good, yellow-bellied loser who is like to get you killed. But do not fret darlin’. I’ll see you taken on by someone more deserving of your spirit. Next town over is a trading post, I’ll do right by you, get myself a dun beast in

body and mind instead. A more fitting match.”

Cade rifled through the heavy saddlebags, pulling out some jerky and a loaf of bread. He offered up a palm-full of oats to the horse before perching on a rock and filling his own belly. Even the meal of simple rations was tinged with regret. He had not deserved the hospitality, but could not have turned down the gifts. Not without being forced to either leave on foot or remain at the cursed settlement indefinitely. He had judged it better to accept what was not due him, than remain where he was and perpetuate the facade.

“There weren’t supposed to be so many,” He began his confession, “we wouldn’t have taken the job on otherwise. Heroism is only worthwhile if you’re sure of survival. Damn bandit gang had been harassing Tailem’s Bend for nigh on a year…they must have frightened you plenty, hey girl? Well, they won’t be botherin’ them folks any longer. My boy’s lives bought them some peace.”

He shook his head and threw the burnt crust of his loaf into the stream, where even the water couldn’t soften it’s bake. Standing, he pulled out a brush and began working down his temporary

companion. He didn’t want to lose any coin due to a messy coat.

“When I saw just how outnumbered we were, I knew we were lost. Couldn’t control my fear…turns out I’m a coward, like I said. Always engineered it before, like as we would win without issue. This time I got it wrong. Hid myself amongst some barrels aside the tavern, listened to the war raging all around. The lads, they did me proud, fought to the last man, left only two of the brigands standing. Makes a man wonder, if I’d been at their side, how it would have gone different…”

He let out a long sigh and paused his work, leaning against the warm, rising belly of the horse. To his surprise, she turned her head and nuzzled at him affectionately. He scratched her nose and smoothed her chin. She was a gentle thing despite her hunger for adventure, a sign of her youth he supposed, willing to let him rest against her without losing patience. Life would harden into her some irritability soon enough, especially on the lawless fringes where they travelled.

“I only emerged from my hiding place when the strikes of gunfire had fallen silent. Like a mouse from

its hole I crawled out unseen, meeting the backs of the last two brutes who had finally overrun my men. I shot them both before they even knew I was there. Blam. Blam. Right in the spine. Only then did doors and shutters start cracking open. The people of your frontier home were met with the view of a lone gunman, standing amongst an army of the dead. The story of a tragic hero materialised in their collective minds as I watched their eyes light up. Better to be a crooked false-saviour than honourable and yellow I figured, and so I assumed the role.”

Cade stashed the brush back in the finely worked leather of his saddlebags and mounted up once more. He adjusted his pistol holster against his leg, noting it was two bullets short of a full cylinder. Ammunition was not something his worshippers had been able to provide. He pulled the rifle from its sling that hung from the saddle and gave it a once over, the weapon had not been fired in weeks. Another signal of his pathetic tale. Thrusting it back in place and pulling his hat down, he clicked Venture onward. He forced her into a rolling walk, conserving her

energy and taking her back up onto the trail.

“So that’s it, my new friend. It is you and I until we reach that market town. Angel Post I think they called it. From there I’ll see you sold to a man more deservin’ of your finery and I’ll use the coin to get myself back East. Perhaps even back to the old world, where cowardice and duplicity are more expected. Either way, I can no longer think of myself as a moral pillar in a lawless land. Best to shed that dream and join the rest in the gutter. Perhaps it is the same road all men take, realisin’ it futile to oppose our true natures.”

They rode on, man and horse gleaming like a beacon of white and wealth against the savage backdrop of the dry wilds. Had Cade not been consumed with putting voice to his ruminations, he might have expected to be waylaid, on account of his obvious fortunes. As it was, he walked Venture straight into danger.

The horseless wagon rolling independently across the mouth of the pass told Cade everything he needed to know in an instant. He was being ambushed and like as not, was about to die. He had led Venture straight into the steep-walled ravine without a second

thought, assuming it would be as empty as the lands around. His preoccupation had made him blind to all he would normally see. Waking himself up from his stupor he spun the spotted mare in place to find a single figure, silhouetted against the bright sun of the only exit. By instinct he wrenched the rifle from its cradle and began to raise it. A shot that ricocheted from a nearby rock, echoing its impact against the close stone walls, insisted he move no further.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” The stranger on the ground advised, “I’ve two sons that have rifles aimed at your head from

hidden vantage points, you'll not live long enough to raise yer weapon."

Three in total. Each with a distinct advantage of position. *Nowhere to hide this time.* Cade thought, as if to cement the lack of the option. Even given the chance, he decided he would rather die than again live with the shame of leaving another to perish in his place, even if that other was a horse.

"What do you want?" He forced himself to ask, sitting straight backed and feigning confidence.

"Your mount, your supplies, weapons. Everything. Time's are

lean partner. We are in need and you have seen fit to provide. We will let you walk, if you agree to do so with nowt but the shirt on yer back.”

If he thought he would survive without them, Cade would gladly have given up the supplies. He didn’t even have any real attachment to his pistol. Venture though…in their short time together he had grown quite fond of the filly. Her lack of judgement and bent ear had been a salve. The thought that her worth in coin was his ticket East did not even factor into the decision, it was pure sentimentality that forged his

resolve. In truth he dreaded what these men might do to her, it was not beyond the hungry to eat a healthy horse and that was likely the better treatment than how they would burden her in life. Leaning forward and placing his hand against her neck, he whispered,

“What do you think girl? Courage together, or more cowardice and inevitably meeting our makers alone?”

To that she raised her head, stomped one hoof into the sandy dirt and narrowed her eyes. Together it was.

With an almost imperceptible squeeze of his heels, Venture exploded forwards. The tactile communication between them meant Cade was able to lean forward to steady himself against the change in momentum and simultaneously raise his rifle. He fired a single shot and knowing it would hit true before even seeing the bloodied eye of the man ahead, he dropped the weapon to the ground. In a single fluid motion he reached down and drew his pistol with his right hand, crossing it over his left that was taking up the reins. One shot, angled upwards toward the young man crouched on

an outcropping of stone sent him tumbling over the edge. Ripping his arm back he stretched it to its full reach, aiming out to the opposite wall of the ravine. A third shot took the last lad from his nest at the top of the ridge, where he disappeared backwards and out of sight.

Once they broke free of the narrow gorge, he heeled Venture around to survey the scene, both of them panting with the adrenaline more than any exertion. Cade let out a loud woop of mixed relief and joy, which was met with an enthusiastic whinny from his horse. His elation went beyond mere survival. He threw his head back to the sky and

opened his arms wide, hat in hand, bathing in the confirmation of self that had come from his bravery. Seeing Venture safe had repaired a small part of the guilt that rode him. It was not a full forgiveness of himself, but it was a first step. He bent forward and slapped the thick neck of his young mount, congratulating her on their success.

“How do yer feel about a change of plans Venture? Fancy sticking together a bit longer? Doing some more good to offset some of my bad?”

The shake of her head and huff of breath could be mistaken for nothing other than consent. Her dancing steps failing to hide her enthusiasm.

“Alright then! Woah! Woah. Steady now! Let’s see if we can’t help some folks between here and Angel Post. If times are as hard as our recently departed friends there made out, no doubt more will have turned to preying on the weak.”

Looking down into the chambers of his pistol at the single shot remaining, he steered his friend back into the close quarters of the gorge. She needed a little

reassurance that the way was now safe and the additional supplies they could scavenge would be worth the risk, especially ammunition, but she went willingly.

As they walked, Cade considered the potential lives he may have just saved. Other innocent travellers passing through would have certainly met the same ambush in the narrow pass, yet still he weighed it against the three desperate men he had killed. Were their lives worth any less? Much alike to the friends he had lost in Tailem’s Bend and the scores of bandits who had fallen in those streets, no soul could be equally

compared to another. He resolved anyway to remain an arm of protection for those who could not defend themselves, for surely an idealistic, young and innocent mind was of more value than a corrupted, resentful and worn one. Between he and Venture, they had one of each, and he knew his logic was sound when he decided which would be sacrifice for the other, should it ever come to it. No fear would again be enough to turn him from that duty to his friends.

Mounted, he rode out of the other side of the gorge and into the dim light of an ending day. He and Venture, together, headed into a

new life of adventure and good intention that he hoped might begin to make up for the tragic lapse in courage that would forever haunt his memory.